

*a n i n s t a n t h e l p b o o k f o r t e e n s*

# mindfulness for teen anxiety

a workbook for overcoming  
anxiety at home, at school  
& everywhere else

**\* stop getting  
overwhelmed** by  
social situations

**\* stay calm** in  
the face of panic

**\* let go of your fears &  
build a balanced life**



CHRISTOPHER WILLARD, PsyD

## ABOUT ANXIETY

**S**ome people have a genetic predisposition to anxiety; because of the genes they inherited, they are more likely to develop anxiety disorders than other people. But all of us experience anxiety at some point in our lives, and with good reason. We need a protective alarm system to alert us to danger and help us stay safe.

Having anxiety is like having an oversensitive alarm system that goes off at all the wrong times, keeping us from getting anything done. It can be downright embarrassing in the wrong situation. Or worse, it can end up putting us in more danger because we are so focused on the false alarm that we miss the signals of real danger.

It can be helpful to know what causes your anxiety, but sometimes it feels more important just to know what to do about it. That is the main goal of this book: to give you practical tools you can use for the toughest anxiety-provoking situations. It may feel hard to be young and facing anxiety, but the positive side is that once you work through your anxiety, which you can, you will be able to help yourself and others for the rest of your life.

And there is a lot of good news. For one thing, you are not alone. One in six teens has an anxiety disorder, which means there's a good chance someone else in your group of friends, a few other kids in every classroom you walk into or sports team you play on, and maybe even a few hundred kids in your entire school all have anxiety. In addition, one in four people will develop an anxiety problem in the course of their lives. You could consider yourself lucky to be getting a head start on learning to cope when you are young. But the best news of all is that anxiety gets better. It is possible to learn to minimize your anxiety so it comes less often, and to deal with it when it does come, so that it no longer has so much power over you or what you want to do with your life.

## why do you get anxious?

**L**ike many illnesses, anxiety disorders tend to run in families. You might want to check with your parents and other relatives to see if they have struggled with anxiety and what they have done to overcome it.

*Do you know anyone in your family who has or might have anxiety? Maybe a relative who seems high-strung or easily stressed out? If you can, talk to that person and write here what he or she has done to deal with anxiety.*

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Anxious people often start with this genetic predisposition. From there, certain events in their lives can make them a bit more anxious. If we've had bad experiences with public speaking in the past, it makes sense that we will start to feel anxious just thinking about it in the future. Even just watching someone else struggle with situations like that can teach us to be cautious, but it might also teach us to be anxious, depending on the circumstances. Some of us can get over these events quickly and move on, but for those of



MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

us who were born more sensitive, our alarm systems can reset themselves to go off more easily and get in our way even long after we are safe again. And of course, some experiences are far worse than bungling a class presentation and can affect us even more deeply.

*What memories stand out for you or make you anxious just to think about?*

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*Does anything you are anxious about stem from a bad experience someone you know has had? If so, write about what happened.*

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*Think of people in your life you can speak with about some of these experiences. Consider friends, relatives, or other trustworthy adults. Write down their names here.*

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Think about how much of your anxiety you feel comfortable sharing with those people; it doesn't have to be your life story or your worst panic attack. Decide to share a bit with one person in the next week, and notice how you feel before, during, and after sharing.

There are a number of other factors that contribute to developing anxiety. For one thing, we live in a dangerous world. We get so many messages from the media, school, our parents, and our friends regarding what we should worry about, from terrorism to STDs, that it's no wonder we walk around with our alarm systems set to high alert. We each need a reliable alarm system for a dangerous world, but that system should also differentiate between realistic worries and unrealistic ones. This book can help you not believe everything you think or every signal your body sends your way.

*What are some messages you've received that tell you the world is a dangerous place?*

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*What are some of your parents' and your friends' biggest worries?*

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

*Which, if any, of these worries have you “caught” from them?*

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So why do you get anxious? It is most likely a combination of your genes, events in your life, and the kind of world you’ve grown up in. The scientific term for this is the biopsychosocial model, a fancy phrase you can now casually drop into conversation in your next psychology class!

## anxiety's aliases

**M**any people, when they first start experiencing anxiety, don't recognize the symptoms. That's because we don't always have experience with anxiety and are not well informed about it. It can be helpful to know what other feelings are often associated with anxiety.

### Exercise: Identifying Anxiety by Other Names

Look over this list, and circle any words that you feel most apply to you. Use the blank lines to add other words or phrases about anxiety.

Afraid

Agitated

Alarmed

## MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Apprehensive

Concerned

Edgy

Fearful

Freaking out

Fretful

Frightened

Frozen

Hesitant

Jittery

Nervous

Overwhelmed

Panicked

Petrified

Restless

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Scared

Stressed

Terrified

Thoughts racing

Troubled

Tweaking out

Uneasy

Worried

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## recognizing anxiety in your body

**W**e often experience anxiety first in our bodies, and then in our minds. Since physical signs can be an early warning signal that anxiety is coming, getting to know your body, and what it may be trying to tell you, is a helpful first step.

### Exercise: Physical Signs

Take a look at this list, and see if any of these are symptoms or signals you get when you are anxious, or just before you get anxious. You can use the blank lines to add any others.

Aching jaw

Backache

Breathing faster and more constricted



## MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Butterflies in stomach

Chest pains

Clenching or grinding teeth

Cramps

Difficulty sleeping

Dry mouth

Feeling numb or tingly

Feeling unusually hot or cold

Feeling weak

Flushed or hot cheeks

Getting colds or flus more often

Goosebumps

Headache

Heartburn or indigestion

Heat in chest

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Light-headedness or dizziness

Muscle tension

Nausea

Neck ache

Pounding heart

Quavering voice

Shaky hands

Stomachache

Sweating

Tightness or soreness in throat

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## your anxiety triggers

**T**here are a number of common situations that cause anxiety in even the mellowest of people. You will almost certainly face many of these situations at some point in your life, if you haven't faced them already.

Anxiety is often hardest to manage when it comes on unexpectedly, so knowing in advance what situations are likely to trigger your anxiety is half the work of managing it. The more you know yourself, the better off you will be in terms of knowing what skills will work in those situations.

### Exercise: Common Anxiety Triggers

On a scale from 0 to 5 (with 5 being most anxious), rate how anxious each of these common triggers makes you feel, and then consider how much of a priority dealing with that situation is. For example, public speaking might make you really anxious, but if you don't have to do it often, it could be a low priority.

## MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Over time, you can definitely lower your anxiety about any of these triggers, especially by using the practices in this book. You might not be able to get all of them to zero, but you can probably lower most of them.

- \_\_\_\_\_ Being alone
- \_\_\_\_\_ Being bored
- \_\_\_\_\_ Dating
- \_\_\_\_\_ Driving
- \_\_\_\_\_ Going to school
- \_\_\_\_\_ Grades
- \_\_\_\_\_ Health concerns
- \_\_\_\_\_ Insomnia
- \_\_\_\_\_ Interviews
- \_\_\_\_\_ Living in a chaotic house
- \_\_\_\_\_ Monday mornings
- \_\_\_\_\_ One-on-one interactions

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- \_\_\_\_\_ Parties and social events
- \_\_\_\_\_ Performing in public
- \_\_\_\_\_ Phobias\*
- \_\_\_\_\_ Public speaking
- \_\_\_\_\_ Social situations
- \_\_\_\_\_ Stress at home
- \_\_\_\_\_ Studying
- \_\_\_\_\_ Sunday evenings
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talking to teachers
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tests and exams
- \_\_\_\_\_ Trying to sleep
- \_\_\_\_\_ Writer's block
- \_\_\_\_\_ Your family

\* Phobias are fears that can cause anxiety. Some people are phobic about snakes, which is not much of a problem unless you live in a jungle or work at a zoo. But others are phobic about germs or social situations, which can be pretty hard to avoid without major disruption to

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

your life. Some common phobias that can get in your way include traveling, being in small spaces, and visiting doctors' offices, among others.

## tracking your anxiety

**L**ooking at your patterns of anxiety over the course of an average day and week can help you respond proactively, rather than react with panic in the moment. You don't have to keep a journal about every second of every day, but it might be helpful to fill out this chart and look for patterns so you can anticipate challenges.

### Exercise: Anxiety Record

Before completing this chart, make copies for later use. At the end of each day, write down situations that made you anxious at different times. Record the kinds of thoughts and physical sensations you were having for each situation, then rate your anxiety on a scale from 1 to 5, with 5 being most anxious.



MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Day _____				
	<b>Morning</b>	<b>Afternoon</b>	<b>Evening</b>	<b>Nighttime</b>
Situation				
Thoughts				
Physical Sensations				
Anxiety Rating				

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

At the start of each week, look over your charts for the week before to help you anticipate upcoming situations that may cause anxiety.

## avoidance and distraction traps

**A**nxiety is uncomfortable in our minds as well as in our bodies. The natural thing to do when we feel uncomfortable is to try to lessen the discomfort or make it end as quickly as possible. We might also avoid situations that make us uncomfortable in the first place.

These strategies can help in the short run but backfire in the long run. You can never live life to its fullest if you avoid *everything* that makes you uncomfortable. If you kept on avoiding, you would never ask out that boy or girl on a date; if you never participate in class, you might end up with a bad grade. Plus, when you avoid too often, you tend to start avoiding a lot of things, and friends and family may wonder what is going on, increasing your shame and creating a whole cycle of avoidance.

As if that weren't enough, avoidance can often make anxiety worse. As you start to avoid things that make you anxious, you get a bit of short-term relief, so you avoid more and more. At the same time, you miss out on the chance to learn that the thing you feared probably wouldn't have been that bad after all. Avoidance becomes a habit, and the thing you are avoiding only gets bigger in your mind.

## Exercise: Coping Activities

There are both healthy and unhealthy ways of coping with anxiety, and you've probably already discovered a few yourself. Do you recognize any of the following in yourself or people around you who are also anxious? Circle the ones you find yourself doing, and think about whether you could trade some of the less healthy ones for healthier ones.

### Healthy

Community service

Dancing

Drawing or painting

Eating a healthy meal

Exercising

Listening to music

Looking at artwork

Playing music

Reading

Spending time with friends or family

Studying

Taking care of your pet

Writing

### **Unhealthy**

Avoiding people

Avoiding situations

Bingeing on sweets

Blaming others

Cutting or self-harm

Drinking

Drugs

Isolating yourself from friends

Skiping class

**Okay in Moderation**

Buying yourself something nice

Computer/tablet time

Food

Personal grooming

Sleeping

Social media

TV or movies

Video games

Healthy distractions can be helpful ways to cope with anxiety, but it is important that they not veer into avoidance of other responsibilities in your life.

## keeping your body healthy

**Y**es, your grandmother was right! Taking care of your body is important not only to your physical health but also to your mental health. Here are a few quick tips for basic body maintenance that can help keep your anxiety at bay, or at levels you can manage.

### Getting Enough Sleep

Your body absolutely needs sleep to have the energy to keep anxiety at bay, but I know what a lot of young people say when I bring this up: “Yeah right. With SATs this Saturday, the big dance on Saturday night, and an English essay due on Monday?”

Maybe getting a lot of sleep isn’t as easy as you would like it to be, but it will make a big difference. Just as important as getting enough sleep, though, is getting quality sleep. Even just going to bed and waking up around the same time daily—staying within a “sleep window”—can make a big difference in how well you



MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

sleep and how well you function. And if that means not sleeping in so much on the weekends, give it a shot for a couple of weeks and see if it helps how you feel.

*How much sleep are you getting on the average weeknight?*

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*How much sleep are you getting on the average weekend?*

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*Do you go to bed and wake up around the same time?*

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*What is your bedtime routine? Is it relaxing to your mind and body, like washing and reading, or is it stimulating, like eating and screen time?*

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## Getting Enough Exercise

Maybe you're already a high school athlete, so getting exercise isn't an issue. But even if you are an athlete, it might help to cross-train with exercise that doesn't have the stress of competition or performance associated with it. Consider dance, yoga, martial arts, or another practice. Find something that allows you to move your body without worries about how well you are performing for teammates, coaches, and spectators.

If you find it hard to motivate yourself, make an exercise playlist, or find a podcast, an audiobook, or some comedy to listen to while you work out. You'll feel better in the moment, and exercise will also help you concentrate more effectively and think more creatively. It will boost your mood and lower your overall anxiety. In fact, a little jog up and down the stairs during a break on the SATs or before a stressful speech can really lower your anxiety and improve your performance. Skeptical? Try it once or twice. An added plus is that getting exercise will help you sleep.

*What days and times can you set aside to get some exercise? Take out your calendar and mark them down.*

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#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

*What are some ways you can exercise if you don't exercise already? For example, could you walk to school, take the stairs instead of the elevator, jog, or take a yoga class?*

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*What are some of your favorite forms of exercise you can do alone? With friends?*

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*How are your anxiety and stress levels after you've exercised compared to before?*

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## Eating Healthy

Breakfast is essential, even if you don't like to eat in the morning or your anxiety makes your stomach too nervous. Start with something easy to digest—trail mix, bananas, yogurt, or dry toast—and see if you can

work up from there. Cut down on sugar, and eat more small meals if you have to, but remember that your body and mind need to have enough energy to keep going.

*Are you eating three meals a day? How healthy are they?*

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*What are some foods you are able to eat even with a nervous stomach?*

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*What are some of your favorite healthy foods?*

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## Cutting Down on Alcohol and Drugs

Alcohol and drugs (and that definitely includes caffeine) may seem to help you relax in the short run, but the medium- and long-term effects can wreak havoc on your body and mind, leaving you vulnerable to anxiety. If you are hungover, your body and mind will be even more vulnerable to anxiety creeping back. Caffeine in coffee, tea, and energy drinks might keep you going while you're studying but will seriously raise your anxiety level. Think about it—many physical symptoms of anxiety are pretty much the same as the physical symptoms of drinking too much caffeine.

*What's your substance intake like these days?*

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*Can you cut down for a few weeks and see if it makes a difference in your overall anxiety?*

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## Relaxing

Last, and most important, *relax*. When you can relax your mind and your body, a visit from anxiety will be

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

far less likely. We all have different ways to relax. Here are a few suggestions: take a bath or shower, practice yoga, take a walk, do some crafting, or try some of the healthy distractions listed in exercise 6.

*What are some ways you like to relax?*

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*Which of these can you fit into your schedule?*

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The acronym HALT is one quick way to remember some of these self-care tips. Check in a few times a day and ask yourself: *Am I **H**ungry? Am I **A**ngry? Am I **L**onely? Am I **T**ired?* If you answer yes to any of those, think of a healthy way you can respond to those needs.

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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## finding balance

**L**iving a balanced life is one of the biggest challenges we face, and everything gets worse when we are stressed. I've heard it said that the average student needs time for three things—sleep, social life, and studying—but has time for only two. Does that feel accurate to you? If you focus on schoolwork and sleep, there's no time for a social life; if you focus on school and socializing, there's no way you're sleeping enough; and if you spend your time focusing on friendships and sleep, you're probably failing your classes. And what about sports, family, jobs, and the countless other concerns young people face, stressing themselves out by feeling as if there is always something more they could be doing? When your time is at a premium, your stress goes up, raising the likelihood of your anxiety getting worse.

*Of sleep, social life, and studying, which do you find yourself emphasizing, and which do you find yourself neglecting or sacrificing?*

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## MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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## don't believe everything you think!

**L**et's say you and a good friend have agreed to meet at the movie theater at 7:15. It's now 7:30, and you're waiting outside the theater, but your friend hasn't arrived yet and hasn't texted or called. Many people would just think, *My friend is probably running late and will be here any minute.* But for anxious people, it can go in any number of ways. Some may think the worst: *There's been a terrible accident; my friend may be hurt!* Others take it personally: *My friend probably forgot about me because I'm not that important to him.* Or maybe even *She ditched me to hang out with someone else. She probably doesn't even want to be my friend anymore.* Others might blame themselves: *I must have gotten the time wrong. I'm so stupid!*

The anxious mind can get quite creative, can't it? Next time you find yourself in a situation like this, see if you can invent wilder stories on purpose, rather than having your anxiety take over and tell you the stories.

## Exercise: Telling Your Own Stories

Imagine that your parents tell you they both will be gone for a week, and you will be alone in the house. What might happen to your parents? What might happen to you when you're alone? List all the possible bad situations and worst-case scenarios you can think of.

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Look back over your list. Circle the things you can control, and underline those you can't.

Knowing that you cannot control or change certain situations, what can you do? Perhaps you've heard these words:

*Grant me the serenity  
to accept the things I cannot change,*

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

*the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Whether you are a person of faith or not, it can be helpful to list your worries, then mark your list to show what you can and cannot change. This approach can be almost like a formula you apply to any difficult situation, helping you determine a clear plan of action in a cloud of worry and emotion.

*Write down a situation that makes you anxious.*

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*What can you do to change this situation for the better?*

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*What do you not have the power to change about this situation?*

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*What could help you let go of worrying about it so much?*

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### Exercise: Recognizing Thoughts as Thoughts

So, what if you could remind yourself that all these stories you're telling yourself are just thoughts, not necessarily reality? It is far easier said than done, of course, but you could start by putting the words *I'm having the thought that...* in front of every anxious thought you have. For example, instead of thinking *I'm going to fail the test*, tell yourself, *I'm having the thought that I'm going to fail the test*.

Write down three anxious thoughts here, then rewrite them, adding the words "I'm having the thought that..."

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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## anxiety in disguise

**S**ometimes our strong emotions get clouded and confused with each other. Strong emotions can also cause us to act out in self-destructive ways. That's why mindfulness, introduced in the next section, can be so helpful. It allows us to see our true emotions more clearly and to respond to them in healthy ways.

### Anxiety and Anger

When Tim was younger, he would lie in bed listening to his parents argue into the night and would worry about what was going to happen. *Would they split up? Were they angry with him?* As he got older, he tried to intervene in their arguments and would end up caught in the middle, with everyone in the family angry with everyone else.

Tim began to associate anxiety with anger, which started to get in the way of his schoolwork. Even his friends became wary of him. When he got on the basketball court, his aggression often led to fouls, which



hurt his whole team. Tim's coach taught him a few basic breathing practices to help him keep his cool during games. Soon Tim was able to see more clearly that underneath his anger and aggression was simple anxiety. He started working on that anxiety, and not only did his anxiety and anger improve, but so did his team's performance.

*Have you ever noticed that some other emotion, like anger or irritability, comes over you when you feel anxious? List a few of those emotions here.*

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## Anxiety and Sadness

Emily's brother had leukemia when they were both young, and Emily was often scared of what might happen to him. Her family was scared too, but they had a hard time knowing how to talk about it. Emily ended up learning that it was better to be quiet than to talk about her anxiety, and so when she was anxious she would keep to herself and feel sad.

Over time, sadness and numbness started to take the place of anxiety, and rather than get anxious when

things got overwhelming, she would become depressed instead. Emily asked her parents if she could talk to a therapist to help her deal with the depression. She and her therapist began to see a pattern: whenever she was stressed or anxious, her depression would emerge. When she learned to manage her anxiety, she no longer became so depressed. With some hard work and a skillful therapist, she managed to interrupt the cycle between her anxiety and depression. Soon both began to improve, and her life became fuller and happier.

*Are there times when you felt your anxiety was buried under a layer of depression or sadness? List a few of those here.*

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## Anxiety and Acting Out

Tina had a long list of coping mechanisms that included scratching herself until she bled, smoking cigarettes, doing drugs, and other behaviors that her parents and friends worried about. She never realized that these unhealthy behaviors were essentially a way of covering up her anxiety, and neither did anyone

else.

In a mindfulness group, she learned to start paying attention to her feelings and what triggered her urges to act out in unhealthy ways. She realized that underneath these urges and behaviors was anxiety. First she would feel anxious, and the next thing she knew she was scratching herself or lighting up another cigarette. Practicing mindfulness and other techniques allowed her to watch her thoughts and urges, and see the anxiety come but also go. She learned to ride out all the urges to shut off her feelings of anxiety with dangerous and self-destructive behaviors.

*Are there times when you've acted out in destructive or self-destructive ways because you were anxious, or do you know people who have done so? Write about some of those times here.*

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For other people, anxiety manifests as altogether different behaviors or emotions, or even a mix of emotions.

*When, and in what disguises, have you seen your anxiety?*

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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*How did you recognize it underneath?*

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## building on your strengths

**T**here is a lot more to you than just your anxiety. Positive psychology is the idea that our strengths are just as important, if not more important, to recognize and understand as our weaknesses. Our strengths are what we rely on to get us through hard situations. In addition to our inner strengths, we may also have people who support us.

### Exercise: All About You

Imagine for a moment that you are being interviewed by a reporter who is writing an article about you for your adoring fans. For each question, write down the first thing that comes to mind.

What are your greatest talents?

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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What are your biggest strengths?

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What do your friends admire and like about you?

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What are some of the hardest things you've been through in your life, and how did you get through them?

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What advice would you give to a friend who is anxious, stressed, or having a hard time?

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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Who is your favorite role model for overcoming hard times, and why?

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Do you have a favorite inspirational quote, poem, or song that helps you through hard times? What is its message?

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What important events and people made you the person you are today?

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Which people are there for you when you need them? (This may include friends, relatives, teachers, mental-

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

health professionals, coworkers, classmates, teammates, coaches, siblings, and clergy, among others.)

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## thought distortions

**T**he more anxious we are, and the longer we are anxious, the more likely we are to be thinking in patterns that are distorted and no longer reflect the reality of our situations. Here are a few of the most common ways that anxious people tend to see the world.

### Black-and-White Thinking

Black-and-white thinking is an all-or-nothing approach—deciding that things must be all bad or all good rather than seeing them as complicated.

*Becca was shy. She had agreed to go to the winter dance with a large group of friends, even though she wasn't so crazy about the idea. Dinner beforehand with friends was fun, and so was the ride over. But as soon as she got to the dance, she started to feel anxious about all the kids she didn't know so well. Rather than remembering that there would be some stressful or awkward moments and some*

*fun ones at the dance, she decided that she hated the whole thing and just about everyone there, and she spent the evening clinging to one friend before leaving early.*

*Have you ever been tripped up by black-and-white thinking, when in fact the situation was more complicated? Describe what happened.*

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## Discounting the Positive

This thought distortion involves looking only at the negative and failing to see the positive. The result is a pessimistic, anxious view of the world.

*After Anthony scored the winning goal in his soccer game, the coach made him a starter on the varsity team, rather than second string. But before long, Anthony started psyching himself out, feeling like a fraud and thinking the only reason he'd scored was because the other team's goalie had made a mistake. He had been practicing for weeks and was one of the fastest players on the team, but rather than seeing what he had done to contribute to his own success, he decided that his success was*

*due only to accidents. He got so anxious as a varsity starter that his anxiety interfered with his game and he ended up back as a benchwarmer.*

*Have there been times when you discounted the positive and only looked at the negative reasons why something good happened? Describe what happened.*

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## Catastrophizing

Catastrophizing means seeing everything as a disaster, or making big assumptions based on minimal evidence.

*Jessica had a stomachache for three days in a row and started to worry about it. Pretty soon she was completely freaking out, unable to sleep and absolutely convinced that she had some kind of allergy, or maybe even stomach cancer. Or could she be pregnant? The more she read about it online, the worse she felt, and the gloomier her thoughts became. By the time she saw a doctor, she was convinced she had only a few months to live. But it turned out she had irritable bowel syndrome, a*

*common health issue for people with anxiety. Soon she was treating her anxiety, and her stomachaches faded.*

*Have you ever catastrophized a situation? Describe what happened.*

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## Emotional Reasoning

In the heat of the moment, when we are particularly emotional, it can be very hard to think clearly and rationally. Something feels real or like it's true, and so we believe that it must be real or true.

*Ashley always felt exhausted after taking a test, partly because she had so much nervous energy. She left almost every exam feeling terrible, which she assumed meant she must have failed, and yet her grades were usually good. When she talked to her parents about it, she began to realize that feeling terrible after a test did not mean that her performance actually was terrible.*

*Have you ever used emotional reasoning, listening to your feelings too much, rather than your thoughts? Describe what happened.*

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## Perfectionism

Many anxious people suffer from perfectionism; they feel as though anything they can't do perfectly is not worth doing at all.

*Taylor felt like she had to be the best athlete, best student, and most popular and talented girl in school, or it wasn't even worth trying. Because she set her expectations so high, there was no way she could possibly hope to meet them. This left her forever disappointed in herself, and anxious about everything. She and I worked together to set realistic, internal, and personal goals for success, rather than measuring herself against others all the time. She found it helpful to remember that all she ever knew about how perfect anyone else was was what they showed the world.*

*Have you ever been a bit of a perfectionist? Describe what happened.*

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### Exercise: Words to Watch Out For

Many of the following words are associated with thought distortions. Over the next few days, pay attention to how often you find yourself saying these dangerous words, whether out loud or in your mind.

All

Always

Every

Everyone

Everything

Have to

Must

Never

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

No one

None

Should

When do you find yourself saying these words?

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How do they make you feel when you say them?

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How true are they?

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

No one

None

Should

When do you find yourself saying these words?

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How do they make you feel when you say them?

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How true are they?

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## worrying on purpose

**O**nce our thoughts are under way, it can be really hard to turn them off. Just try this: don't think about a pink elephant for the next minute. And...go!

Did that work? Probably not. In fact, often the more we try *not* to think about something, the more we end up thinking about it. The fact is, when you are anxious, the parts of your brain that think rationally almost completely shut down, making it nearly impossible to reason with yourself. At times like that, you need to sidestep rational thought and try something completely different. As Albert Einstein said, "No problem can be solved from the same level of consciousness that created it," and he was a pretty smart guy.

Here's the positive: the more we try to think about something, the harder it can be.

*Try thinking about your biggest worry right now. What is it?*

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*Now set a timer and give yourself a full two minutes to do nothing but worry. What happened?*

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After a few minutes of deliberately worrying, many people find that their minds actually get tired of worrying and move on to something else. Eventually, that will happen for your mind as well. It can be helpful to set aside five or ten minutes once or twice a day to worry on purpose; you can put a reminder in your phone or on your calendar and try it for yourself. Better for you to find your anxiety and face it than to wait around for it to find you!

Writing down your anxious thoughts is another way to get them out of your head, and research shows that writing down worries and then tearing them up and throwing them away can actually help.

## Summing Up

In this section, you hopefully learned a bit about what anxiety is and where it comes from. You also got a better sense of what makes you anxious and the times and triggers that heighten your anxiety. Anxiety can be like other unpleasant things we encounter: we want to get rid of it, avoid it, or find a way to experience it

less intensely. Unfortunately, there are times when these strategies don't work, or even make things worse. You learned that anxiety is very common— and very manageable. You learned about ways to identify anxiety, especially when it disguises itself, and practiced a few healthy coping strategies. Now that you know your anxiety a little better, you can be less afraid of it.

Take a moment now to reflect on the lessons, skills, and practices in this section.

*What activity did you relate to most?*

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*Which skills do you think you would be most likely to use in your daily life?*

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*Which skills do you think you can try in the next week?*

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## MINDFULNESS: PAYING ATTENTION TO THE PRESENT

**T**here is an old story about a traveler who met a meditation guru at a remote mountaintop temple. The traveler asked, “What is it you do here that is so special? It seems to me that all you do is work and eat and walk around all day. That’s just what we do back in the city.” The master paused for a moment before responding, “But when we work, we know we are working; when we eat, we know we are eating; and when we walk, we know we are walking.”

That is what mindfulness is all about: doing one thing and being fully aware of what you are doing. You might want to think about it in terms that make sense to you; for example, *When I’m studying, I know I’m studying; when I’m running, I know I’m running; when I’m shooting hoops, I know I’m shooting hoops.*

Mindfulness is paying attention to what is happening in the present moment, noticing when and where your mind may wander and bringing it back. It may sound hard, because our minds have a tendency to wander, but mindfulness, like any other skill, is something we can develop with practice.

## what does mindfulness have to do with anxiety?

**A**nxiety sneaks up when we are paying attention to everything *but* the present moment. Anxiety comes when we are too focused on the future, the what-if scenarios we have no control over.

Say you have a big test coming up. If you're anxious, you'll probably start imagining that you'll fail the test. Spinning out from there, you might imagine that you'll never get into college, end up jobless, and die homeless, alone and unloved—a detailed tragedy that ends years in the future. There you are, envisioning your miserable end instead of just planning for tomorrow's test!

By staying in the moment, which is the essence of mindfulness, we keep that story from getting away from us; we just focus on what is right in front of us and give it our full attention.

If you try any of the practices in this book for very long, you'll notice that your thoughts begin to wander. That does not mean you're doing anything wrong; your mind is just doing what it does: creating thoughts and thinking them. As a teacher of mine once said, "The mind creates thoughts like the heart pumps blood and the mouth secretes saliva." We cannot and probably should not try to shut them off altogether. The

trick of mindfulness is to be aware that you are thinking.

One question many anxious people ask is, *Why would I want to pay attention to my thoughts? My thoughts are the very problem I'm trying to get away from!* It's a good point. But I think—in fact I know—that if you pay attention to your overwhelming thoughts, they can start to seem a lot less overwhelming. In mindfulness practice, we see all our thoughts and feelings and urges as they really are, without distracting ourselves. We can then choose which ones we want to pay attention to, which ones we want to believe and respond to from a place of wisdom and calm.

Here is an example of how truly paying attention can be helpful, and how not paying attention can get us anxious and worked up.

*Amelia was out on a date with Jake. They saw a movie, then took a long walk. The date was going so well that neither of them wanted it to end, so they went for ice cream.*

*Amelia took the first few bites of her ice cream. Her taste buds were telling her Give me more of that! She could also feel messages from her stomach: I dunno, I'm kinda full here. Meanwhile, her mom's suggestion to just relax and enjoy herself was in the mix, but so was a friend's advice: "Don't eat a lot in front of boys or they'll think you're a pig." Not knowing which voice to listen to, she began to panic, wondering what to do or say as she felt her chest tightening and her heart racing. She mumbled something to Jake about not feeling well and rushed out, feeling like a total loser. The next*

*day was worse, as she started to worry about what Jake might say to everyone else back at school.*

But imagine if Amelia had brought some mindfulness to the situation. Aware of all those voices, she could have listened to the wisest of them. She could have slowed down, paid attention, and calmly decided what she wanted to do before the anxiety took over and she took off. Instead, she ended up getting hijacked by anxiety, and slunk home feeling embarrassed.

*Describe a situation when you were overwhelmed by too many thoughts rather than being able to pay attention to just one at a time.*

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*What are some situations where a bit of mindfulness could have helped you?*

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The practice of mindfulness gives us insight into the ways our own minds function. Each time we manage to stay in the present moment for a little longer, each time we remember and anticipate our thought



#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

patterns and forgive our brains for making thoughts, the right solution to whatever problem we are facing at the moment is that much more likely to arise naturally and calmly.



## the power of singletasking

**A**nother way to describe mindfulness is to think of it as singletasking—just doing what you are doing, aware of what you are doing, without doing anything else. This is not how we typically operate in our modern multitasking world, so it can feel a bit unfamiliar. But it can also feel good, relaxing and centering us.

Multitasking can also feel good because we feel as though we're getting a lot of small things done, but research shows that we are actually less efficient when we multitask than when we do just one thing at a time. Worse, when we multitask, life seems more chaotic, which only increases our anxiety. So before you write off this idea of singletasking, try this practice for less than a minute.

### Mindfulness Practice: Singletasking

- Close your eyes, and place one finger lightly on your forehead.

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- Take a breath, and just notice what this sensation feels like.
- Notice what your finger feels like against your forehead. Notice what your forehead feels like against your finger. Become aware of texture, temperature, maybe even your pulse, and any other aspects of sensation from this simple action of awareness in this very moment.
- Take another ten seconds to just notice and allow for any sensations and thoughts.

How do you feel after trying this practice?

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Was it helpful? If so, in what situations could you see yourself using it?

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## bodily tension

**H**aving a sense of what mindfulness feels like in your body can help you identify when you are being mindful and when you are not. With that awareness, you can move from tension to a more mindful frame of mind.

### Mindfulness Practice: Mind and Body

- First, sit up rigidly straight, tensing your back muscles and flexing your shoulders. Hold your hands out in front of you in fists. Notice what this feels like in your body. How does it feel to breathe in this position? What emotions come? What kinds of thoughts arise? Can you think of recent times when your body felt like this?
- Next, allow your body to slump over, with your back slouching, all your muscles released, and your head falling down. Notice what this new position feels like in your body. How does it feel to breathe in this position? What emotions come? What kinds of thoughts arise? When have you felt like this recently?

- Now sit up straight. Hold your hands out, but not too tensely, perhaps resting on your knees, and with your palms open and upward. Your head and chest should be lifted, but not tense. Notice how this shift feels in your body. How does it feel to breathe in this position? What emotions come? What kinds of thoughts arise? Are there times when you feel like this?

These few positions show how different mind states feel in our bodies. In the first position, making fists, most people report feeling tense, stressed, angry, ready to fight, or even just anxious. They feel closed off to new ideas, with not many thoughts. This is the physical state of the fight-or-flight response, and it is what happens when we try to resist what is going on in our world and end up stressed by it. Check in with your body throughout the day and week, and as you do, you might want to notice whether you are carrying any tension like this, physically or emotionally, and to just let it go.

The second posture, slumped over, although relaxing, is perhaps a bit too relaxed and passive. A lot of people feel sleepy or overwhelmed or just feel like giving up in this position. We want to be aware of times when we are feeling this way, and find ways to reenergize ourselves. Sometimes people ask, “If relaxation is important, why shouldn’t I just sit around and watch TV when I’m stressed?” The answer is that you end up in this passive state of overrelaxation that comes close to feeling helpless and like giving up, rather than in an alert state of openness, like the next posture brings.

This third position represents mindfulness, openness, and active acceptance, rather than passive acceptance or active resistance. We are as awake and alert as possible without inviting tension, and as

relaxed as possible without giving up. We are at the proper balance in our bodies and minds. This is the mental and physical posture we want to aim for in most of life's situations, in order to be open and able to respond to whatever comes our way.

Often, when we start to feel anxious or approach a triggering situation, shifting our pose into one of mindfulness, even for just a few seconds, can make a tremendous difference in how we feel. Our minds and bodies are much more connected than we often give them credit for being.

## body scan

**A**s you read earlier, much of our anxiety begins in the body, overflows to the mind, and then just hijacks the whole mind-body system. But when we really start paying attention to the body, we can sense anxiety at the moment it begins and head it off before it snowballs, reaches our minds, and leaves us totally overwhelmed. The more we know our bodies, the more likely we are to be able to stop that snowball before it becomes an avalanche.

So how do we get to know our bodies? By now you've probably caught on and are thinking *through mindfulness*. And that's right! Follow the script below, and you'll pretty quickly get a sense of what to do. You can also record yourself reading the script, or do this with a friend, family member, or therapist reading along. With practice, your mind will get in the habit of automatically checking in with your body, even just for a moment, without needing a reminder. It's the same way that practice helps you automatically do a multiplication table or perform on the soccer field.

For some people, getting in touch with the body might be harder than for others. Maybe you feel as

though your body has betrayed you in the past through sickness, or through weight gain or loss; maybe you don't like your body; or maybe thinking about certain parts of your body can bring up some bad memories or emotions. If any of these is the case for you, I'd encourage you to be extra cautious with this practice, and consider doing it with someone you trust.

### Mindfulness Practice: Body Scan Script

- Find a comfortable place, preferably one where you can lie down on your back undisturbed for about five or ten minutes. Close your eyes. Allow whatever surface you are on to just hold you, and trust your body to breathe for you.
- Start by simply bringing your awareness to your breath. As you breathe in, allow your awareness to flow into and throughout your body, and notice the body's various points of contact with the surface beneath you.
- Once again, bring your awareness to your breath, following it down your throat and past your belly and imagining it reaching all the way down into your legs and feet. As you bring your awareness into your toes, just notice any sensations there. Notice temperature, moisture, the sensation of socks if you're wearing them, your skin...and then deeper under the surface, feeling the muscles and bones deep under the skin.
- Follow your breath once more into your feet, aware of any other sensations in this part of your body. Take a moment just to be with them and notice how they feel. Your feet have been carrying you around all day. You may want to send them some gratitude for their hard work. As you breathe in again, follow your awareness



#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

into your ankles and calves. Breathe again now into your knees and thighs, exploring any sensations there.

- Now follow the breath into your lower back, aware that the lower back can be a place where we store tension and anxiety.
- On the next breath, follow your awareness around to your abdomen. Feel the movement as your belly rises and falls.
- Next, breathe into the upper back and shoulders, another place where stress can hide.
- Let go now of your back and shoulders, and bring your awareness into your chest, exploring this area and what it might be telling you.
- Next, gently follow the breath into your fingertips and your hands. Breathing in once more, follow your awareness into your wrists, into your forearms, and upward into your upper arms and shoulders, aware of the sensations and your body and mind responding to these sensations.
- Now breathe awareness into the back of your head, being aware of how your head feels, and on the next breath into the crown of your head, into your forehead, and down into your face. Just notice sensations as they arise, and notice thoughts or emotions or urges that go with them, watching them change with each breath.
- Take a moment now to thank the parts of your body for their hard work in keeping you alive and healthy. Then quickly scan through the body once more for any tension or discomfort, and just breathe into that part of the body for a few breaths.
- And now, begin to shift your attention from deep inside your body toward the outside, bringing your



MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

awareness into the room around you. Feel the soft surface underneath you, and allow your eyes to gently open, knowing that you can take this new awareness and comfort with your body into the rest of your day and life.

How did you feel in your mind during and after this practice?

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In your body?

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What feelings and urges came up?

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Did sensations stay constant or did they change?

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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What emotions did you notice in your body?

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How did you respond to discomfort, physically and emotionally?

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## bringing mindfulness to your anxiety

**H**ave you ever been so nervous about a game that you forgot your equipment you needed for it? Or so worried about a test that you didn't notice you'd walked past your classroom? Have you ever seen an old cartoon where a character caught up in thought and worry crashes right into a brick wall? These scenarios show that when we are captive to anxiety we are often not paying attention to what is right in front of us. Staying in the present, we have to deal only with the present, not emotions and thoughts about the future.

Try this simple two-minute experiment. Find a spot without distractions, sit down, and do nothing for two minutes: no texting, no music, no TV, no fidgeting. You can set a timer on your phone, or you might even want to try the website <http://www.donothingfor2minutes.com>. Take these two minutes to just notice what is happening in your mind, in your body, and in the room around you.

*What were your thoughts during these two minutes? And right now?*

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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*What kinds of emotions and feelings were you having during the time? And right now?*

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*What did you notice in your body during those two minutes, and what can you feel in your body right now?*

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*How did you respond when distractions came up?*

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One of the most important parts of the practice of mindfulness is not judging ourselves for having thoughts. You don't have to like your thoughts, but try to let go of feeling ashamed of them. My favorite way of thinking about the mind is as a puppy that just wanders around in search of anything interesting, sometimes getting itself into trouble. What's the best way to train a puppy? It's not by making the puppy

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

feel bad, but by gently picking it up and bringing it back to a safer place over and over again, with a patient smile on your face.

We start to learn about our anxiety by bringing mindfulness to it, or to certain triggers. We do this by paying attention to what is happening in our minds and bodies as we start down the path of anxiety.

Once again, sit still for a moment or two (it doesn't have to be a full two minutes this time), and take a few deep breaths to clear your mind. Remember, you don't have to like what you notice; just notice it. Take a moment now to bring your thoughts to the subject of school.

*What kinds of emotions did you notice?*

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*What kinds of thoughts came up?*

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*Did you notice any changes in your body or physical sensations?*

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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Now bring your mind to friends and dating.

*What kinds of emotions did you notice?*

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*What kinds of thoughts came up?*

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*Did you notice any changes in your body or physical sensations?*

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Now try bringing your mind to your family: parents, siblings, and other relatives.

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

*What kinds of emotions did you notice?*

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*What kinds of thoughts came up?*

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*Did you notice any changes in your body or physical sensations?*

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*What are some situations that really get your anxiety going? Bring them to mind, and then write about what emotions, thoughts, and physical sensations come up with them.*

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Pay attention over the next few days and notice where your mind tends to wander. Are there times, places, situations, or people who trigger certain reactions?



## the present moment

**Y**ou may have heard wise people talk about the importance of living in the moment, being in the here and now, or staying present. I myself had heard this advice for many years without ever really understanding what it meant. Then one day, it just hit me. *If I'm in the moment, I'm not in the future, worrying about what could possibly happen to me or to people I love. If I'm in the here and now, my mind is not halfway across town, wondering what some other person thinks of me. If I'm in the present, I'm not stuck feeling bad about the past, about things that happened to me or things I did. And in the present, things are actually pretty okay.* Suddenly, the whole idea of staying in the present moment started to make a lot more sense.

Of course, staying in the present moment is easier said than done. Sometimes we have to make plans for the future, and it's always important to examine the past to learn from it. The problem comes when we are too focused on the future, which tends to make us anxious, or too focused on the past, which can tend to get us depressed. I once heard someone say, "Make plans, but don't plan on the outcomes." I think that's pretty

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

good advice about finding the balance of how much to focus on the future. The other reality is that things are usually okay in the present moment; for the most part, bad things exist in the future we imagine or the past we can't let go of. And if bad things *are* happening in the present, they don't usually last that long.

*What are some times planning for the future has helped you?*

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*What are some times you have gotten stuck thinking about the future too much?*

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*What are some lessons you have learned from the past?*

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*What are some times you have been stuck in the past or wished you could change it?*

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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*What are some times you have been able to be fully in the present moment?*

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*How did those moments feel?*

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## visualizing the present

**M**indfulness is basically just paying attention to what is actually happening in the present moment. The present moment is usually not so bad because, after all, you're alive and breathing, even if you're uncomfortable or things feel uncertain. So with mindfulness, we watch what is happening in the present moment, sometimes paying attention to things outside us, sometimes to things inside us, but mostly just keeping our mind and attention trained on the present without wandering too far into the past or future.

Let's practice now by imagining our thoughts going by without getting caught up in where they come from, or where they're going, just noticing them as they arrive and then letting them go.

### Mindfulness Practice: Thoughts on Parade

- Take a moment to find a comfortable posture, and just begin to bring your awareness to your thoughts.

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- Imagine a parade going by on the street; you are sitting or standing and watching the parade go past.
- Now try to imagine each of your thoughts actually on the floats going past, or perhaps on signs and banners carried by marchers in the parade. Take a few minutes, and just imagine the thoughts passing by.
- Remember, don't join the parade and start marching with the thoughts; just stand back and enjoy the show, knowing that even the biggest thoughts will pass by or be carried away by someone in the parade.

What did you notice during this practice?

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How do you feel after this practice?

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There are all kinds of ways we can imagine our thoughts passing other than in a parade. Try a few of these and see which one fits you best.

- Boats or other objects float past on a beautiful river, while you watch from the banks and are careful

not to get swept up in the flowing water yourself.

- Cars and traffic rush past on the highway while you stand on an overpass and simply observe them coming and going. The biggest thoughts are in buses or trucks, the smallest in small cars or motorcycles.
- A conveyor belt moves along in a factory, where your job is to inspect each thought as it passes, keeping the good ones moving and tossing out the mistakes.
- Thoughts float by in bubbles.
- Thoughts drift past on clouds in the sky.
- Follow the bouncing ball as if you were singing along with a karaoke machine.
- Watch thoughts as scenery passing by on a train.
- See thoughts as fish swimming in a lake that is still and reflective on the surface.
- Stand in the shallow end of the pool, looking at the deep end without slipping. See thoughts in and under the water.

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- Sights and sounds arrive at a factory as raw materials; thoughts come out.

*If there is another image that works for you, describe it here, or draw it on a separate piece of paper.*

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## clearing the mind

**W**hen we are overstressed and overbooked like so many people these days, it becomes hard to see which thoughts and signals are important and worth paying attention to, and which ones are false alarms. The more we have going on, the harder it is to separate our anxious thoughts from our important ones, with the result that we become overwhelmed.

It can help to imagine that your mind is a snow globe, with thoughts and feelings and sensations as the glitter that is swirling all around. Every time you do anything, the snow globe gets shaken. An argument with a friend will make the glitter swirl, and so will something exciting, like winning a game or getting asked out. As the glitter starts to swirl, it's much harder to clearly see the scene in front of you.

How can you get the glitter in the snow globe—or the thoughts and emotions in your mind—to settle so that you can see clearly? You need some stillness, which is exactly what mindfulness provides. Remember also that when the glitter settles, it doesn't go away; it just no longer distorts the clear view of what is in front of you.



## Mindfulness Practice: The Snow Globe

- Find a snow globe, a glitter ball, or even just a jar with some water and sand or glitter, and shake it. Imagine what is floating around as your thoughts, and take a few moments to just watch as they settle. Experiment with shaking it up a lot or a little; either way, just watch and wait for it to settle.
- Now close your eyes and bring your attention to your mind. Try to imagine all of your thoughts settling with each breath. They never go away, but they can move aside and allow more clarity and calm in your own head.

You can even make your own snow globe from a kit and put your favorite inspirational images or quotes into it.

## bringing mindfulness to your emotions

**A**t our core, we humans have just a few basic emotions, but even these can be hard to recognize when we are feeling anxious. Take some time to explore these other emotions mindfully, in addition to exploring the mental and physical aspects of anxiety.

### Exercise: What Your Emotions Feel Like

Remember a time when you felt each of these emotions. If nothing comes to mind, you might want to watch YouTube clips or listen to songs that you know make you feel these ways. Write down what you feel in your body and mind as you experience these emotions.

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

Emotion	What I Feel in My Body	What I Feel in My Mind
Happiness		
Sadness		
Anger		
Anxiety		

Once you start to know your body and learn to listen to its wisdom, you can start to use mindfulness of the body to ease your anxiety. This next practice is an experiment in bringing mindfulness to emotions in the body.

### Mindfulness Practice: Releasing Fear

- Close your eyes and bring to mind an upcoming situation that regularly raises your anxiety level. Imagine it in your mind's eye: the people, the place, sounds, and smells.
- Now turn your attention inward, and notice where in your body you feel that stress or anxiety. Notice what these sensations feel like. Begin to imagine yourself breathing into this part of your body, just a breath at a time, slowly breathing into that spot. With each breath, breathing some calm and warmth into that area, and breathing out fear and anxiety.
- Breathing in calm...
- Breathing out worry...
- Breathing in peace...
- Breathing out fear...

You may need to try this a few times before it feels natural, or you may want to find words that fit better with

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

your personality or the feelings you experience when you think about a difficult person, place, or thing that triggers your anxiety.

## bringing mindfulness to everyday activities

**B**ecause we can't sit down and meditate every time something difficult comes up, we can't rely on something like a formal sitting meditation to get us through every stressful or anxious situation. It is helpful to schedule mindfulness practice for a few minutes every day, but sometimes all we have time for is to bring mindful awareness to a few moments or activities.

Here are several situations where you can experiment with being fully in the moment. Don't try to do all of them mindfully every day; just pick one or two and see if doing those mindfully can become part of your routine, and then add some more the next week.

Remember, mindfulness is essentially paying attention, so when you are doing any of these things, try to do them with your full attention and do nothing else. Think back to the story: "When we eat, we know we are eating..." Gradually, you can turn life into a mindfulness practice, and mindfulness into a way of life.

- Lying in bed when you first wake up

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- Showering
- Drying yourself
- Combing or brushing your hair
- Brushing your teeth
- Making your bed
- Putting on your clothing
- Tying your shoes
- Packing your bag
- Walking
- Riding in a car or bus
- Speaking
- Listening

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- Washing your hands
- Eating
- Playing sports
- Doing chores
- Cooking
- Playing music
- Stretching
- Drawing or painting
- Writing
- Playing with your pet
- Any other activities that are part of your daily routine:

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## Summing Up

**I**n this section, you learned more about the concept of mindfulness—paying attention to what is happening in the present moment with nonjudgment. Mindfulness helps with anxiety because you can see more clearly what your thoughts and feelings really are, rather than misinterpreting them. Once you see clearly, you can see what to do that will help. Staying in the moment means not being caught in worries about the future or sadness about the past, but rather appreciating and enjoying what is here, now. You also learned a few mindfulness practices and began to get to know some of your anxiety triggers and how you experience anxiety and other emotions emotionally, psychologically, and physically. In the rest of the book, we'll look at using mindfulness in some of the most challenging and anxiety-provoking situations young people face.

Take a moment now to reflect on the lessons, skills, and practices in this section.

*What activity did you relate to most?*

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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*What skills do you think you would be most likely to use in your daily life?*

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*Which skills do you think you can try in the next week?*

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This poem sums up the beauty of appreciating the present:

*Ten thousand flowers in spring, the moon in autumn,*

*a cool breeze in summer, snow in winter.*

*If your mind isn't clouded by unnecessary things,*

*this is the best season of your life.*

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

—Wu Men, untitled poem

## AT HOME

**A**rguments. Stressed-out siblings. Rowdy roommates. Loneliness and worry. All of these and more can keep home from feeling like the comfortable place we want it to be, and that it deserves to be. Home itself might be a difficult place that triggers our anxiety, or at times we may unintentionally bring the stressors of the world home. No matter which, we cannot change everything about our environment to make home what we want it to be, but we can change a few things. And most important, we can change how we respond to challenges at home.

## making your space peaceful

A few years back I worked with Katie, a college freshman who had terrible anxiety about being away from home and was rapidly spiraling into depression. She didn't feel close with her roommate and hated being in their room. One afternoon, I asked her to describe the room to me.

"Well," she said, "there's the dorm furniture, and my roommate has her side of the room set up, but since I never like being there and share it anyway, I just have my bed and desk and dresser on my side, with my stuff in boxes."

I was astonished. She had not put up a single poster, put any photos on her desk, or even taken her stuffed animals out of the boxes she brought with her. No wonder Katie felt so unhappy there; it didn't even feel like her room, it didn't feel like home, and it didn't feel safe!

We spent the rest of the session planning ways to set up the room so it would be a place where she could feel comfortable. After that, she strategically set up objects and art that reminded her of happy memories, put up some inexpensive curtains, and from a thrift store got a small rug and funky lamp that reflected her

personality. She soon felt as though she had a calm space that was at least partly her own, away from the chaos of the world.

You might not yet be in college, but what is your space like? Does it feel safe, comfortable, yours? Those who share a room with siblings or others can even just set up small corners with objects that remind them to stay calm: perhaps some stones from the beach, photos of the mountains, candles, religious objects, inspirational quotes in calligraphy, or gifts from friends. If your home is noisy, try getting a white noise machine or turning on a fan or soft music to drown out the turmoil outside.

*How can you change your environment to feel more calm and comfortable in your own home?*

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*What are some objects or artwork that help you feel calm? (If you can't get the actual objects or artwork, perhaps you can get posters, postcards, or photos of them.)*

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

*Think of inspirational quotes from books you've read, favorite song lyrics, or online posts that particularly speak to you. Write them down here, and if possible put them up somewhere you will see them regularly.*

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## fighting in the family

**H**ome should feel safe and stable; that is the message we get from the media and the larger culture. But for many teens, home can feel chaotic and unpredictable, even unsafe. Parents may be fighting with each other, siblings may be struggling, and financial and other pressures can make home a tense place to be. But the fact is, we *have* to spend time there, so how can we find internal stability in the face of swirling stress and chaos?

One of my favorite visualization meditations is called the Lake Meditation. By practicing this meditation, we can stay as calm as the bottom of a lake, no matter what is happening around us. The weather and seasons may change, and we may even look different on the surface at different times, but we can remain settled deep down.

### Mindfulness Practice: Lake Meditation



#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- This meditation can be done in almost any position, though you may find it most helpful to lie down, perhaps with a cushion beneath you.
- Take a moment to bring your attention to the sensations of your body settling into the softness beneath you.
- Now imagine a lake. Perhaps this is a place where you have spent time, or maybe one you have seen in pictures. Just imagine the water resting in the earth, the way you are resting in the cushions beneath you.
- Consider the surface of the lake, imagining the ways it changes depending on the time of day or the season—still and reflective in the morning as fog lifts off the surface, or perhaps there are some ripples in the afternoon. And though the surface may change, underneath, deep down at the bottom, the water is still.
- As the weather changes, the surface may change. Thousands of raindrops may beat down on the surface, or the sun may warm the first few inches, or wind may create waves and small whitecaps on the top of the lake. Yet underneath, there is stillness.
- Seasons change, and in this way the lake's surface changes as well. The reflection one day may be a summer sky and clouds, and then soon golden leaves fall on the surface of the lake, as the trees reflect bright autumn colors in place of summer green. As winter approaches, the surface may reflect the drab surroundings, until finally it freezes over with ice, then snow atop the ice. Even as springtime comes and the ice and snow begin to melt and the sky brightens, through it all the bottom of the lake remains still, resting, calm.
- And so while the outside world may change with time and situations that you encounter, these need not disturb the stillness, peace, and quiet underneath. Can you find the stillness deep inside of yourself, allowing yourself to rest there and ease your anxiety and worries?
- Take the lake's wisdom and lie down now for the next few minutes with strength and stillness through

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

whatever arises around you and within you.

## mindfulness through music

**L**istening to music is a great coping technique for many teens and adults. We all have our favorite songs, and just as a lullaby can calm a frightened baby, one of our favorite tunes can instantly bring us a moment of peace, calming our minds and bodies. Sometimes, though, we are too agitated to just let music calm us down. It can help to listen more deeply, more mindfully to the music, and allow its effects to calm us.

### Mindfulness Practice: Mindfulness and Music

- Find a quiet space to listen to your stereo, or better yet, put on headphones.
- Make yourself comfortable lying down or sitting in an upright yet relaxed position. Make sure your clothing is comfortable and you feel warm enough.
- Take a few breaths and allow your body and mind to settle.

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- There are a few ways to bring your deliberate attention to the music. One way to start is to pick a single instrument or sound to follow through the song. Listening like this can be quite soothing, as it narrows your attention, moving it away from difficult subjects. Experiment with listening to the other instruments, and see how many different sounds and tracks you can trace throughout the length of the song. You may be surprised at how much you notice.

What did you notice when following just one instrument?

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A second way of listening in a mindful manner is by listening with your body. Get comfortable, and pay attention to the sensations in your body as the sounds of the song resonate through your body. It can be amazing to see how our bodies receive and respond to music as it lands and ripples through us.

What sensations did you become aware of in your body?

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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What, if anything, surprised you or interested you?

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The last way I suggest listening to music is by focusing on the body, then tracking your reactions through the song. Notice what happens automatically: emotions, memories, thoughts, or associations. As each comes up, simply notice it, name it, and return to noticing.

What emotions did you notice?

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What memories?

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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What other thoughts or associations?

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Earlier you learned mindfulness of breathing, because wherever you are, you always have your breath. Now with electronic devices that fit in our pockets, we can also have mindfulness of music just about everywhere we go.

## alone time

**I** once heard someone say, “If your mind is a dangerous neighborhood, don’t go there alone.” Those are certainly wise words, but life often has moments when we are left alone. The house is empty, our friends or our roommates are nowhere to be found, and we are left with ourselves and our own thoughts. Some people thrive on this alone time and need it to recharge mentally and emotionally. But eventually, we all become lonely. Human beings evolved to thrive in communities, with friends and families, and loneliness can be extremely painful and overwhelming.

*What are some ways you deal with alone time?*

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*What are some activities you do best alone?*

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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*What are some times you have been alone without feeling lonely or anxious?*

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*What are the loneliest times of day or loneliest places for you?*

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*When, if at all, do you expect to be alone in the week ahead?*

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Mindfulness practices like the following one can help with loneliness.

### Mindfulness Practice: The Compassionate Friend

- Find a comfortable position; a sitting posture is probably best for this practice. Close your eyes. Place both hands so that you can feel their warmth on your chest. Notice what this feels like, and just gently breathe in this position.
- Now imagine you are in a room where you feel safe and cozy. It could be a room where you've been, or maybe a luxurious place in your imagination. The lighting and temperature are just right, and the furniture is soft and comfortable.
- In a moment, a visitor will come to your room, a being who would just like to be with you for a while. It may be a spiritual figure, someone from your past, a pet, or just a warm loving presence, but it should be someone who embodies qualities like courage, warmth, strength, and unconditional acceptance.
- Go to the door and invite this being in. Sitting back down, invite your friend to take a seat too, at a distance you feel comfortable with. Feel your friend's presence, and just savor what that is like. Perhaps you want to smile or otherwise acknowledge your gratitude to this person.
- And now, your compassionate friend would like to share something wise with you, to share exactly what it is you need to hear right now. Maybe it's through words, maybe it's through a gesture or an expression, or maybe it's just by transmitting a feeling; just take in whatever it is this friend wants you to know. Be together, open to anything you might hear.

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- Your friend will be departing now, but you can bring his or her presence back at any time, just as you can return to feeling that nearby presence at any time and are never truly alone.
- Take a moment to reflect on what you received from this friend, and when you feel ready, gently allow your eyes to flutter open on the actual room.

What was the room like where you met your friend?

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What or whom did you pick to come visit you?

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How did you feel in the presence of this friend?

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

What wisdom, if any, did your friend share with you?

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How did you feel right after the practice?

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Whom else could you visualize when no one is around or get in touch with if you feel lonely?

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## calming your mind for sleep

**Y**ou know the feeling: lying in bed, tossing and turning and unable to sleep. You're trying not to think about how tired you will be or to check your phone every few minutes to see what time it is. Your thoughts are racing; maybe with excitement or with nothing interesting at all, but more likely with worries. Worries in particular can keep us up at night, our thoughts bouncing to the past or future.

As the night goes on, you check the time and worry even more, and while you're looking at your phone, you decide to check your e-mail and Facebook. Now that's got you thinking and worrying even more, so you toss and turn for a while longer, knowing your stress and anxiety will be even worse when you are overtired tomorrow—and the vicious cycle repeats itself until sunrise.

For many of us, going to bed is the first time we let our guard down and stop distracting ourselves. Into that empty space comes a flood of thoughts and feelings, often overwhelming us. Regrets about the day, that embarrassing moment from lunchtime haunting us, and then we flip to tomorrow's to-do list and worrying about that exam. And when it's time to sleep, there is really nothing we can do about either the day behind

us or the day ahead of us.

So how can we get into the present moment and slow down some of our thoughts and calm our bodies? I often recommend visualization exercises that calm the body and give the mind just enough to focus on.

### **Mindfulness Practice: Riding the Waves**

- Begin by lying down on your back. Allow your head to be propped up enough so you can see your belly. Find something to place on your belly—maybe your hands, a pillow, a book, or a favorite stuffed animal.
- Focus on your breath, bringing it into your belly, and just notice as your belly slowly moves up and down, watching the object you chose as if it were gently bobbing on the waves of the ocean.
- When your mind wanders off, which it inevitably will, just bring it back to your belly, and focus your eyes on whatever is riding the gentle waves of the breath.
- Listen to the sounds of your breath...feel it all together...and just breathe like this for a few minutes until your breath has slowed down.
- Now turn out the light and keep your mind focused on the breath, riding the gentle waves until your mind and body have slowed.

This practice is one that can really help calm both the mind and the body together, but sometimes it can

feel hard to focus that much. If you find that to be true for you, I'd recommend doing more to calm just the body, through this next practice.

### **Mindfulness Practice: Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

This practice will start again with the body, slowing and relaxing your body so that it triggers your mind to relax as well. This is a practice you might read first, then try; you'll probably get the idea pretty quickly. If you want to, you can record yourself speaking aloud, or trade recordings with a friend or someone else.

- Start by lying down on your back and allowing your body to sink into the surface underneath you. Bring your attention to your breath, taking a deep breath in and feeling your belly rise, and then release.
- Squeeze all the muscles in your feet, flexing them forward and curling your toes. Notice what all that tension feels like running through your muscles. Keep squeezing just a bit harder...harder...and then release. Let go, and feel the tension ebb away and the relaxation flow into your feet and toes. Take a moment to appreciate the difference before and after you released the tension.
- Now pull your feet toward the tops of your calves and stretch the toes outward...then release. As the tension flows away, feel the newfound relaxation flow in through your feet and toes.
- On the next breath, tense the muscles of your ankles and calves for a breath or two, then relax and release, opening to the change of sensations.

#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

- And now when you feel ready, tense the muscles of your thighs and knee for a moment or two; then when you are ready, just let go and allow the relaxation to wash over your whole lower body.
- On the next breath, clench your buttocks and hips, squeezing as tightly as you can, and then release.
- Now turn your attention to your back. Feel it tightening as your shoulders pull back and the muscles along your spine tense...and then let go.
- Next clench the muscles in your stomach and upward into your chest, your whole torso tightening for a few moments and then just letting go.
- On the next breath, turn your attention to your hands, balling them into fists as tightly as you can, squeezing and then just releasing and relaxing.
- Follow your awareness now into your forearms, holding the muscles tightly, tensing your biceps and triceps. When you do let go, just be with the feeling of relaxation as it washes back into your arms.
- On the next breath, tense your shoulders and neck, aware of what the tension feels like, and as you let go, be aware of that feeling of release.
- Finally, bring awareness to the muscles of your face. Start by furrowing your brow, then squeezing your eyes and clenching your jaw, feeling the strain and stress in all of these facial muscles, really feeling these last few moments of tension in your muscles. Then just let go, allowing the relaxation in, and just rest with it, enjoying it for a few moments.
- Take just a moment now to quickly scan all the muscles of your body. Feel the newfound relaxation in your feet and legs, up through your hips and into your torso and back; feel the relaxation in your arms and hands,



and pay particular attention to it in your neck and shoulders, then in the muscles of your face. Stay with those feelings for a few more moments as you lie there.

- If you feel like it, shift to a comfortable sleeping position, focus on the relaxation seeping into your mind, and allow yourself to just drift off to sleep.

Other tips from sleep experts include turning your clock around so you can't see it, which can mean plugging your phone in somewhere other than your bedside table. Don't play with your phone for at least a half hour before bed, and definitely don't check it in the middle of the night, even to see what time it is. It may sound crazy not to know what time it is if you are tossing and turning, but think about it: doesn't knowing the time actually make you more anxious rather than less? Exercise helps, and so does eating on a regular schedule, but don't do either within at least a few hours of bedtime, and definitely stay away from caffeine and sugar. A regular bedtime ritual or routine trains your body to know when it's time to relax and get to sleep. Take a bath or shower, pray or meditate if you do those things, and read something calming like poetry or something that doesn't remind you of your stressors. If you need to, consider using an eye mask and ear plugs to keep out extra distractions. Finally, try to think of your bed as the place where you sleep, not the place where you study or catch up on e-mail or surf the Internet.

## Summing Up



**H**ome is wherever we may make it, but for some of us, home may be more triggering than relaxing. We can make some changes to our environment so that we feel safer and less anxious, but often we also need to make some changes within ourselves and make an effort to notice the positive. This section offered practices for staying calm when the house feels hectic; whether your parents are fighting or there are other worries in the home, you can remain stable and maybe even serene. Other exercises were designed to help you sleep, let go of worries, and tolerate being alone. Home also offers a number of opportunities for informal mindfulness practice, bringing mindful attention to chores, family interactions, and other activities we tend to do on autopilot.

Take a moment now to reflect on the lessons, skills, and practices in this section.

*Which activity did you relate to most?*

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*What skills do you think you would be most likely to use in your daily life?*

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*Which skills do you think you can try in the next week?*

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The following poem describes a way to feel comfortable with ourselves, the home we will always have and always take with us.

*This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house*

*empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.*

—Rumi, “The Guest House”

## AT SCHOOL

For many young people, school is a minefield of people, places, and situations that can trigger anxiety at any time. With mindfulness, we can learn to anticipate those dangers before they arise, and then to prevent anxiety from overwhelming us.

## mindful planning

**T**he first step is getting to know what triggers you most during the school week. Often there's a day or two that brings up more anxiety than the rest. For many, it's Monday, knowing that the whole week is ahead; for others, it might be Friday when, for example, they have a math quiz every week, or they start talking to people about weekend plans.

*What days of the week are particularly hard for you?*

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*On a scale from 1 to 5, how anxious do you feel on those days?*

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MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

*What do you tend to worry about?*

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There are also times of day that may be more stressful: a class that is particularly challenging or with a tough teacher; a gym class with a bully; or lunchtime, with the social stress of finding your friends in the cafeteria. Some people might get tired and feel more vulnerable by afternoon, and for others, medication side effects may kick in at certain times.

*What times of day are harder for you?*

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*On a scale from 1 to 5, how anxious do you feel during those times?*

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*What kinds of worries come up in your mind and in your body?*

MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

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School presents a number of situations and scenarios that anyone with anxiety might dread. For some, it's tests that cause the most anxiety; for others, it may be speaking in class for a presentation or even just adding to a discussion. Maybe for you it's talking with a teacher, dealing with writer's block, or just the whole idea of school altogether.

*What situations in school trigger you the most or have triggered you in the past?*

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*On a scale from 1 to 5, how anxious do you feel during those times?*

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*What kinds of worries come up in your mind and in your body?*

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#### MINDFULNESS FOR TEEN ANXIETY

By now you probably have a sense of what some of your anxiety triggers are during the school day. Remember, knowing is half the battle, so armed with this knowledge, you can start to work on your anxiety as it arises in specific situations.